AIMS For a better birth...

Ten years after a stillbirth - how good care can make all the difference.

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Shane Ridley describes her experience of the stillbirth of Katie Eva and how during those times the kindness and compassion of midwives and doctors made such a difference. She and her husband had all the support from professionals that she could have wished for, even though it was at a time of great sadness.

I wrote this ten years ago in the months after our first baby, Katie, was stillborn at 40+weeks, at Christmas-time. Beverley was asking around for birth stories for the Journal and I offered her mine. She said she wanted something positive to balance other stories in the Journal, and I thought of my story because although it is overwhelmingly sad it is extremely positive. Katie will always be part of our family, John and I are still very happily married and we have a very special precious boy, Patrick who fills our lives. So, no matter the highs and lows of pregnancy Ð family wins out in the end. This is what I wrote for our local NCT magazine.

This is probably the most difficult thing I have ever written, partly because I think it will be difficult for people to read. You will see on the Birth Congratulations announcements that our baby, Katie Eva, was stillborn. We were asked if we wanted the announcement, which we did, but I thought I would like to write an article about the experience of having a stillborn baby. Please carry on reading because you need to know that it is not an all bad experience.

I need to start at the point of great anticipation - the contractions had started and we went to hospital early in the morning of the 27th December - the day the baby was due to be born. You will know that one of the first things that happens is for the midwife to check for the foetal heartbeat, she tried to find it but couldn't and we realised something was very wrong. It is difficult to recall now what exactly happened then, but it was soon confirmed that our baby had died. The Registrar was wonderful and helped us to decide to carry on with labour. Our first reaction was to plead for a caesarean - take the baby away as quickly as possible. But she said no - for my health it was better to deliver naturally and if we wanted to try again it would be safer.

So everyone cared for us for the following hours, and I delivered Katie Eva at ll.15pm that night. It was a very special time for us - during the day we had told our families and close friends, talked to the doctors and midwives and the Hospital Chaplain. When she was born John held her first until I felt ready to. She was baptised a little while later by the Hospital Chaplain. We were in a special room on the ward which is very private and has been decorated and furnished especially for such circumstances.

John and his mother stayed with me all night, and the following morning Katie was brought back to stay in the room with us. We all cuddled her again. In reading this you may by now have begun to say "I wouldn't have done that/couldn't have done that" - I know I would have done before. All I can say is that the staff at the Royal Berks gave us all the choices and information that we needed. Nobody made us do anything we didn't want to.

So, the first positive things - we had experienced a reasonable pregnancy with no particular problems, we had the joy of waiting for the baby, I had a baby without too much pain and I was not at any risk, John and I are parents, and above all the care we received from the staff at the Hospital was truly wonderful.

We went home on Thursday evening. John went back to the hospital on Saturday to see Katie again with his parents and sister.

On Sunday we both went back with friends to see Katie and to take some photographs. The Hospital Chaplain met us again in the afternoon and we had a blessing with Katie. It was New Year's Eve and it felt the right time to say goodbye for the last time to our daughter. The nurses had dressed her in some clothes we had brought in from home, and she had some teddies and toys that had been bought especially for our baby. Each time we went back to the Hospital we saw Katie in the special room on the ward, cared for all the time by the staff.

We saw the New Year in together quietly, trying to talk about new hopes and dreams for 1996. We had many phonecalls to relatives and friends over those days, lots of tears but lots of comfort and support. The cards and letters started on the Saturday and still continues.

More positive things - we cuddled our baby, we had the time to say goodbye and we began to feel the comfort and support of our relatives and friends. We comforted each other. We talked a lot (so much so that I almost lost my voice on the Monday!) Physically, I was recovering quickly. My midwife came every day and checked me over. I had a Valley cushion (wonderful relief) and the homeopathic hypercal meant the stitches healed without problem. Both John and I went for consultation for a homeopathic remedy to help us get through the next few days. That week is now a bit of a blur, but I know it was full of hurdles - a friend took us into town for the first time (it seemed that there were babies and children everywhere), we started to drive again, and we visited the churchyard where Katie was to be buried.

The funeral was on Monday 8th January. We had discussed the content of the service with our Chaplain and consequently it was a very comforting, peaceful and personal experience. Katie is at peace.

The following day I went with John into his work for an hour or so - another enormous hurdle, I know, for both John and his colleagues. We had decided the previous week to go away to some friends in Italy, so we packed and left the house and cat in the care of neighbours. It was a good thing to have done and we caught up on our sleep and got back our appetites back. The return home to reality was a bit frightening, but there were lots of letters to read giving us comfort and friends to talk to.

More positive things - I didn't have any health problems, we both discovered homeopathy, we found much comfort from our Chaplain and from Katie's funeral and above all we have been overwhelmed by the kindness and friendship shown to us from relations, friends, neighbours, colleagues and from people we didn't even know until this happened to us. If we needed our faith in human nature restored, this has certainly done that.

Now the future dawns, without Katie, although she will always be in our hearts. We have hopes and dreams for the coming year, so we take a deep breath and carry on.

Just to close, we would like to say a special thank you to members of the NCT who have helped us through these days, and also mention the organisation SANDS (Stillbirth and Neo-natal Death Society) whose work, amongst others, has led to the wonderful care we received from the staff at the Royal Berks. Our relatives, friends and colleagues have given £600 to SANDS and £120 to NCT as a retiring collection at Katie's funeral.

I will end with two thoughts, both from a booklet we've been given 'Saying goodbye to your baby'. "The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain...When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you will find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy. When you are sorrowful, look again into your heart, and you will see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." And from a father whose baby died "If I believed in having graves, I would write on the grave stone 'Tread softly - for you tread on my dreams'."

I have to tell you that Suzanna Nock's twin girls were stillborn on November 28th 2006. She is our wonderful Lottery Coordinator and very important member of AIMS committee. We send her, Bob and her boys our heartfelt condolences on the loss of Louisa and Helen.